

## “There’s A Storm Coming!”: Reading the Threat of Climate Change in Jeff Nichols’s *Take Shelter*

In July 2012, London’s Royal Court theatre staged *Ten Billion*, a collaboration between high-profile climate scientist Stephen Emmott and theatre director Katie Mitchell. As its entry point into the debate around climate change, the play/lecture starts with the prediction that by the end of this century the world population is likely to be around ten billion. It proceeds to set out in rigorous detail the drastic impact this will have on the climate and the rapidly diminishing range of options we have to divert this grim geophysical trajectory. The setting for this production of *Ten Billion* was a naturalistic reconstruction of Emmott’s office at the University of Oxford, complete with the banal materiality of office life: filing cabinets, pen pots, piles of books and, of course, plenty of electronic equipment. Indeed, throughout the performance, projectors, computers and lamps in the room hummed gently yet persistently, acquiring an eerie electrical significance as Emmott quantified the amount of energy required to carry out a single internet search.

As a partnership between the arts and sciences, *Ten Billion* raises a number of issues that circulate in mainstream discussions of climate change; among them, the reliability of scientific prediction, strategies for communicating future threat, and the role of literary and artistic interpretation in a discourse dominated by the so-called ‘hard sciences’. Perhaps seeking to strike the balance between the kind of dispassionate scientific data, which perennially fails to galvanise individuals and societies into action over climate change, and the ardent demands of climate activists, Emmott’s delivery is calm but compelling as he engages in a process of scenario mapping that has become increasingly familiar within mainstream climate change debate. The crisis we face, argues Emmott, is on a scale equal to

an asteroid on a collision course to earth. Yet we remain inert, struggling to attain even the most minor of international agreements. As Emmott readily admits, unlike an asteroid, climate change is not currently a clear and present danger – at least not in the global North. The threat environmental changes pose to a well-entrenched way of life in wealthy societies is notoriously ungraspable despite repeated and increasingly fervent warnings from experts in the field. Lacking the imminent threat of Emmott’s asteroid, our collective response to climate change seems determined by an imaginative impasse, which challenges both our comprehension of the elongated timescales within which the earth sciences work – tens of thousands of years in the past – and the contemplation of a future with no humans at all. This perceptual challenge is a developing area of concern, both within the sciences and in the humanities.<sup>1</sup>

As the Royal Court’s production suggests, the conceptual shift in thinking needed to cultivate a shared sense of planetary vulnerability is often most effectively tackled in the cultural sphere.<sup>2</sup> *Ten Billion*, as well as recent documentary films like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) or *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour* (2007), directed by Leila and Nadia Connors, seek to mitigate the imaginative impasse around climate change through narrative techniques which include reframing scientific data for non-specialist audiences, mapping possible future scenarios, and celebrity endorsement. Yet these strategies often fail to address what Sheila Jasanoff (2010) describes as the “impersonal, apolitical and universal imaginary of climate change [as] projected and endorsed by science”, which tends to overlook “the subjective, situated and normative imaginations of human actors” (235). As Jasanoff’s comments suggest, there is a tension between the global scope of climate change – along with its “universal” scientific imaginary – and the need to recognise differential experiences of environmental degradation as well as its political dimensions. Moreover, as Kate Soper

(1995) has argued, sustaining the idea of a “general species accountability” (262) for climate change is problematic given that the history of industrialisation is also one of inequality and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> The universals inherent in public debate about climate change thus provide a further obstacle to the exploration of its present and future effects.

Where documentary invariably seems to address questions of scientific accuracy and reliability, narrative fiction is well-placed to explore the historically and socially situated experiences of, and vulnerability to, a changing environment. The growing body of literature, film and theatre on the subject offers a flexible imaginative forum within which to consider the pressing epistemological and ontological questions arising from the growing acceptance of anthropogenic climate change: how can we begin to think of ourselves not only as social and political subjects, but as a “geophysical force” (Chakrabarty 2012, 11)?; what is the nature of our relationship to non-human others?; and how effective are Enlightenment models of rationality for dealing with the material, political and scientific uncertainties engendered by unpredictable environmental change? This essay considers one example of this trend: Jeff Nichols’s 2011 film *Take Shelter*, which, in dramatising the imaginative impasse often engendered by the environmental crisis, suggests alternative ways of knowing our environment to the empirical modes within which contemporary discourses of climate change tend to operate.

As Stephen Bottoms (2012) notes, in recent years climate change has become a “contested cultural idea; mediated by varying forms of cultural narrative whose conventions and rhetorics impact significantly on how the ‘story’ is told” (339). Where contemporary theatrical representations of the issue in Britain “dramatize the often-difficult relationships between research scientists, politicians, activists, and the lay public” (Bottoms 340), recent mainstream cinema has dealt with climate change in predominantly apocalyptic terms.

Roland Emmerich's 2004 blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow*, for example, depicts a scenario in which a series of extreme weather events result in a sudden new ice age. Smaller budget films, such as Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* (2007), John Hillcoat's *The Road* (2009) and *The Age of Stupid* (2009), directed by Franny Armstrong, also emulate the future-mapping scenarios prevalent in climate science in their depictions of Earth post-apocalypse. Most recently, Joseph Kosinski's *Oblivion* (2013) and *After Earth* (2013), directed by M. Night Shyamalan, provide a vision of earth in which humans no longer exist at all. As critic Phil Hoad (2013) has noted, rather than this being a cause for lamentation, both films seem to 'revel in the spectacle of a depopulated planet Earth returned to a stunning Eden-like paradise' (np).

Jeff Nichols's tale of contemporary middle America in *Take Shelter* initially appears to have little in common with these overtly environmentalist films, which graphically render the after-effects of extreme climate change. The film's protagonist, Curtis LaForche, is a construction worker who lives with his young family in small-town Ohio. Curtis is a dependable, emotionally-muted family man and, when he begins to have vivid dreams of apocalyptic storms, he assumes they are a symptom of the same mental illness that institutionalised his mother when he was a child. Indeed, as Curtis's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic, his friends and family dismiss his visions as the product of inherited schizophrenia and in doing so safely annex the apocryphal storm as a symptom of his psychological turmoil. As Nick Pinkerton (2011) has pointed out, Curtis's dreams in *Take Shelter* are a flexible metaphor, suggesting variously a generalised climate of fear relating to the threat of terrorism, the precarious economic climate and the twenty-first-century souring of the American dream. Moreover, as Curtis takes ever more costly measures to safeguard his

wife and daughter against the prophesied storm, his actions reflect Nichols's keen interest in exploring contemporary expressions of masculinity.<sup>4</sup>

However, though the film deftly captures the climate of anxiety in a post-9/11, post-Katrina, post-Lehmann Brothers US, *Take Shelter* simultaneously resists these allegorical readings in order to confront audiences with the unsettling spectre of catastrophic climate change. The figurative 'climate of fear' becomes instead a climate to be feared. Yet rather than contemplating a post-apocalyptic future of scarcity, war or chemical saturation, *Take Shelter* dramatises the imaginative impasse that prevents collective action over environmental degradation by denying the film's viewers a secure epistemological framework through which to interpret events. Unlike the empirical, evidence-based rhetoric in which climate change is most often couched, *Take Shelter* explores the significance of alternative forms of knowledge arising from intuition and insight, presented here as quasi-prophetic. This presents a challenge to the rationalist discourses that have shaped humanity's relationship to nature historically, which are further destabilised by Nichols's aesthetic and generic ambiguity. Working both within and against traditionally conservative Hollywood conventions, Nichols's film uses genre and spectacle to appeal to a wide audience, while rejecting the neat resolutions and narrative closures offered by much mainstream cinema. In the context of climate change, such resolutions often elide the complexity of the environmental crisis by resorting to narratives of human indomitability or nihilistic apathy. Before elaborating these arguments with detailed reference to *Take Shelter*, I will briefly consider some of the perceptual challenges posed by the notion of anthropogenic climate change, as well as how knowledge about the environmental crisis circulates within both scientific and cultural domains.

## Imaginative Impasse

A key challenge to the collective imagination of, and engagement with, the implications of global climate change relates to the uncertainty over scientific data and future predictions. As Garry Brewer (2007) points out, although there is now more or less a consensus among scientists that rapid environmental change is inevitable, climate science is decidedly unreliable when it comes to predicting the future. As a result, we are “challenged to imagine many different and possible ‘futures’ as humankind seeks to exert its mastery and control” (159). Acknowledging this, Joe Smith (2011) argues that the science of climate change “should not be responded to as a body of ‘facts’ to be acted upon”, but rather as “a substantial and urgent collective risk management problem” (20). He continues:

Projecting climate change as a risk problem rather than a communication-of-fact problem helpfully deflates ‘debates’ about whether climate change is or isn’t scientific fact. Such an approach doesn’t walk away from the science but rather opens more possibilities for people to be tolerant of the unsettled, developing relations between climate science, policy and politics. (19-20)

In line with Smith’s sense of the “unsettled” nature of climate change discourse, Renata Tyszczuk (2011) advocates the concept of “provisionality”, not only as a way of thinking through our relationship to scientific discourses of climate change, but also to the planet itself. For Tyszczuk, provisionality “is not something to be overcome, a structural vulnerability, but rather the *underlying condition of the world*” (27, original emphasis).

Coming to terms with such ontological and epistemological transformations is evidently a key challenge in the era of climate change.

For Mike Hulme (2008), when represented by scientists as a global geophysical problem, climate change enacts a “de-culturating” effect, in which the varying impacts of a potential (or currently unfolding) ecological crisis are decoupled from locality, human practice and behaviour (8). According to Hulme, when presented as an “overly physical phenomenon” that is “distanced and un-situated relative to an individual’s mental world”, climate change engenders a “psychological dissonance” (8) which allows individuals to voice concern over the issue without translating this into action or a change in behaviour. This dissonance is often characterised as a problem of both scale and temporality. In spatial terms, the global scope of the climate change threat is conceptually irreconcilable with the lived experiences of “human actors engaging directly with nature” (Jasanoff 235). Temporally speaking, the “longer view” of “deep history” advocated by Edward Wilson (1996) – which he describes as “the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of years” (Wilson ix) – contends with a consideration of our ethical duties to future generations. Yet Hulme (2010) insists that climate change “is a crisis of today even if we would rather depict it as a crisis of tomorrow.” He continues: “[t]he future and the present are interacting in new ways as we tell ourselves the story of climate change. The epistemological boundaries between knowing the present and knowing the future are not as distinct as we would make them out to be” (272). As we shall see, Curtis’s prophetic visions in *Take Shelter* similarly trouble Hulme’s “epistemological boundaries” by positing alternative, more intuitive and partial forms of knowledge as a way of challenging the dominance of empiricism in cultural engagements with anthropogenic climate change.

In line with Hulme, Sheila Jasanoff argues that climate change discourse:

detaches global fact from local value, projecting a new, totalizing image of the world as it is, without regard for the layered investments that societies have made in worlds as they wish them to be. It therefore destabilizes knowledge at the same time as it seeks to stabilize it. (236)

According to Jasanoff, this paradoxical scenario calls into being “new, esoteric centers of knowledge” (237) which are fundamentally at odds with the defining spatio-temporality of Modernity as a process of linear human progression. Evidently, the contemporary climate crisis gives renewed energy to the ongoing interrogation of historical distinctions between humans and non-human ‘others’. Indeed, one of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2009) key theses on the topic is that anthropogenic explanations of climate change “spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (201). Similarly, Val Plumwood (2002) asserts that the ecological crisis “requires from us a new kind of culture because a major factor in its development has been the rationalist culture and the associated human/nature dualism characteristic of the west” (4). This dualism, Plumwood explains, is “a system of ideas that takes a radically separated reason to be the essential characteristic of humans” thereby situating humanity “outside and above an inferiorised and manipulable nature” (4). The shift in thinking required to imagine the dissolution of the dualisms that “split mind from body, reason from emotion” (4) is represented in *Take Shelter* thematically through the idea that Curtis’s prophetic dreams and visceral hallucinations, which register themselves physically on his body, might prove to be a valuable form of knowledge. The film also troubles Plumwood’s oppositions formally, however, by refusing to delineate for viewers a clear division between fiction and reality within the diegesis; there are no clear aesthetic boundaries between Curtis’s dream-world and his waking life. *Take Shelter* posits the



contiguity of different forms of knowledge, undermining the binary structures within which empirical and intuitive versions of the world are often systematised.

Slavoj Žižek (2008) provides a politico-psychoanalytic account of our confrontation with ecological crisis. Critical of what he describes as “the ecology of fear” – a distinctly conservative discourse in his view – Žižek identifies an element similar to Hulme’s “psychological dissonance” at work in our understanding of climate change.<sup>5</sup> In his essay “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses”, Žižek recounts the moment during the run up to the Iraq war in 2003 when Donald Rumsfeld famously listed the “known knowns”, the “known unknowns” and, finally, “the unknown unknowns”. For Žižek, however, Rumsfeld missed out a crucial fourth term: the “unknown knowns”. These are the “things we don’t know that we know” or, in other words, the Freudian unconscious. According to Žižek there exists a series of “disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves” (np). He continues:

In the case of ecology, these disavowed beliefs and suppositions are the ones which prevent us from really believing in the possibility of catastrophe, and they combine with the “unknown unknowns.” The situation is like that of the blind spot in our visual field: we do not see the gap, the picture appears continuous. (np)

It is precisely this disavowed knowledge that emerges in Curtis’s visions and premonitions. What is so disturbing about his dreams, however, is their resistance to a metaphorical reading; the idea that they might not be a manifestation of his psychological turmoil but an accurate prediction of coming catastrophe. Deploying his aesthetic resources strategically, Nichols ruptures Žižek’s “continuous picture” by disrupting viewers’ sense of the film’s

diegetic ‘reality’. It is a source of doubt whether Curtis’s experiences of unusual weather in his waking life are confined to his own head, or whether it is his friends and family who are failing to register the growing threat.

Cinema’s ability to give visual form to latent fears about the future in the context of environmental degradation suggests it has an important part to play in ‘re-culturating’ climate change outside the predominantly universalist terms of the earth sciences. Charting cinematic visions of environmental apocalypse over the last half century, Frederick Buell (2010) makes the point that representations of environmental disaster are no longer polemical and instead have become a standard form of entertainment depicting militarised and “post-natural” environments:

Today, speculative visions of the future in film almost obligatorily present a dystopian vision of environmental-social apocalypse [...]. But this vision is not meant to shock us into our senses and make us seek alternatives. Instead it is something audiences are meant to and indeed do *consume* [...]. (31, original emphasis)

It would certainly seem that big-budget movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* are more invested in entertainment than transformation. Similarly, in hinting that post-apocalyptic solitude and wilderness “might be a good thing” (Hoad np), *After Earth* and *Oblivion* preclude from the outset both a sense of responsibility for the unfolding environmental crisis, and the possibility of action to prevent its worst effects. Outside the mainstream, however, this lack of transformative value is presented on different terms. The representation of enviro-social collapse in *The Road*, for example, reflects what Simon Critchley (2008) describes as “passive nihilism” in response to climate change; a jaded sense of inevitability that reflects a

“motivational deficit” (6) at the heart of contemporary liberal societies. The passive nihilist, according to Critchley, “looks at the world from a certain distance, and finds it meaningless” (4). Bleak though it may be, the post-apocalypse as depicted in *The Road* is also ahistorical; divested of any framework of causation, solution or action. Benh Zeitlin’s more recent film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2011) – in which a fierce storm tears through an impoverished bayou settlement in Louisiana cut off from the mainland by a levee – is similarly depoliticising in its recourse to the triumph of the human spirit in the face of extreme poverty and degradation as a result of climate disaster and the ineptitude of political leaders. Though they take vastly different views on the effectiveness of human agency when faced with catastrophe, both films evade the complex ontological and epistemological implications of the environmental crisis. Eschewing these prevailing modes of engaging with the end times, *Take Shelter* provides an oblique commentary on cultural resistance to the realities of a changing climate and an analysis of the provisionality of human knowledge about our environment.

As has been recently discussed in *ISLE*, green film criticism is a rapidly expanding field and extends its reach beyond explicitly ‘environmentalist’ films.<sup>6</sup> In viewing *Take Shelter* from this perspective, my aim is to draw out the material rather than the metaphorical significance of Curtis’s apocalyptic storm. As a metaphor for psychological turmoil or financial crisis, the turbulent weather in Nichols’s film becomes purely rhetorical; a setting within which the film’s emotional dramas are played out. As Neil Smith (1996) notes, nature is usually rendered in narrative fiction as “a backdrop, a mood setter, at best a refractory image of, or rather simplistic metaphor for, specific human emotions and dramas” (41). Occupying the shifting terrain between metaphor and materiality, however, the storm in *Take Shelter* produces an unsettling state of epistemological uncertainty, which reflects the provisionality (in Tyszczyk’s sense) of our knowledge about, and relationship to, the

environment. While this does not necessarily make *Take Shelter* a candidate for inclusion in the category of “eco-cinema” as defined by Scott MacDonald (2004),<sup>7</sup> it nonetheless helps elucidate the more abstract ontological and epistemological questions outlined above. For Macdonald eco-cinema should offer “an alternative to conventional media spectatorship” (109) through anti-Hollywood strategies such as long takes, hand-held camera techniques and extended screenings. By these means, filmmakers provide “forms of visual/auditory training in appreciating the transitory” (108). As I will elaborate below, *Take Shelter* works towards MacDonald’s “retraining of perception” (109) by operating both within and against the generic conventions of Hollywood cinema. Employing uncertainty as an aesthetic and thematic strategy, *Take Shelter* rejects Hollywood’s conservative closures, and in doing so evades the prevailing filmic image of climate change as either entertainment product or depoliticised inevitability.

*Take Shelter*: between metaphor and materiality

Val Plumwood begins her book, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002), by drawing a parallel between the sinking of the *Titanic* and current attitudes towards climate change:

we have reached the stage in the narrative where we have received the iceberg warning, and have made the remarkable decision to double the engine speed to Full Speed Ahead and go below to get a good night’s rest. A change of course might be bad for business, we might have to slow down, lose time. Nothing, not even the ultimate

risk of the death of nature, can be allowed to hold back the triumphant progress of the ship of rational fools. (1)

While (the melting of) icebergs are a key feature of mainstream climate change discourse, they also provide an appropriate metaphor for the incremental, often intangible, effects of global climate change as the majority of their bulk is hidden below the surface of the water. Significantly for the present purposes, the concealed iceberg also provides an image of Žižek's unconscious "beliefs and suppositions" about the nature of the environmental crisis. In *Take Shelter*, Plumwood's "rational fools" take the form of a small community in rural Ohio, who dismiss as the product of inherited schizophrenia Curtis's persistent visions of the coming apocalypse. The "crisis of reason" to which Plumwood's title refers plays an important part in *Take Shelter*, which pits Curtis's insight against the impassive rationality of the Ohio residents. Disrupting this duality at both a formal and thematic level, however, *Take Shelter* explores how rationality itself can come to justify irrational behaviour, such as the failure to take action in the face of rapidly increasing environmental degradation. How logical is it, the film seems to ask, to do nothing in the face of imminent disaster?

As Curtis first becomes aware of the approaching catastrophe through his dreams, *Take Shelter* invites a psychoanalytic reading, which interprets his nocturnal visions as manifestations of a deep-seated anxiety about the future. He is, after all, a young father struggling to provide for his family and pay the medical bills for his deaf daughter in a precarious economic climate. A further rationalisation of the dreams is provided in the form of Curtis's mother, who is a diagnosed schizophrenic and became ill when she was in her thirties. Latching onto this explanation, Curtis initially treats the dreams as signs of an impending psychic breakdown and pursues a medical cure. His attempts to rationalise the

disturbing visions take him to the public library, where he begins to research mental illness, and to visit his mother in search of parallels with his own experiences. Curtis appears at his first therapy session clutching a sheaf of notes and tells the counsellor that he has already completed a schizophrenia diagnosis test included in one of the books and scored five out of a possible twelve. Keen to systematise his unsettling experiences, categorise and name them, Curtis lists the official symptoms of schizophrenia, explaining that he has experienced two out of five: “delusions” and “hallucinations”. This instrumental approach is quickly thwarted by Curtis’s counsellor, who forces him to confront a psychological as opposed to biological inheritance. Yet even as a manifestation of his repressed childhood trauma, the dreams remain safely in the metaphorical realm.

Bolstering this psychoanalytic reading, *Take Shelter* depicts visual and thematic metaphors of the unconscious. As Curtis’s visions intensify, the old storm shelter in his back yard begins to exert a magnetic fascination and he is increasingly compelled to delve into, and excavate, its depths. Curtis’s job as a construction foreman also entails digging down into the unknown. Many of the film’s scenes unfold at the building site where Curtis and his colleague Dewart are drilling holes into the earth for the purpose of laying foundations. As Curtis begins to unravel – eventually losing his job and the precious health insurance it comes with – the repeated shots of the pneumatic drill driving into the earth assume a psychological significance which suggests the destabilisation of Curtis’s psychic foundations. Yet these visual metaphors also resist a symbolic reading, and in doing so confront viewers with the materiality of an environment which appears increasingly threatening. As Curtis progressively transforms the storm shelter into a fully-functioning underground bunker, it becomes an eerie reminder of the anticipated nuclear apocalypse of the Cold War, intimating that the threatened storm might be on a similarly destructive scale. Equally, the focused attention paid to the

drill's excavations suggests a link between the increasingly erratic weather Curtis experiences and the continued exploitation of the earth's resources for the purposes of human development. Indeed, it is precisely when the drilling is at its loudest that Curtis hears the portentous thunderclaps that rupture his "continuous picture" of environmental harmony and stability, heralding the emergence of his disavowed knowledge about the changing climate.

As Curtis is a modern-day Noah making preparations for the retributive flood, his dreams are saturated with aquatic imagery. The torrential downpours that occur in the dreams often obscure Curtis's vision, leading him to endanger his family, such as in one dream when he crashes his car during heavy rain. However, water is also a continual presence in Curtis's waking life. Explicit commentary on the rain's ability to halt work at the construction site, as well as scenes depicting sudden downpours, both contribute to the sense of ambiguity between Curtis's two mental states, and emphasise the significance of rain as 'matter' that will have a determining role to play in humanity's future environmental security. Likely to be the most widespread and imminent impact of climate change, flooding has become increasingly evident in both poor and wealthy parts of the world. While rising sea levels are threatening countries such as Bangladesh, the Maldives and Tuvalu, there are increasing instances of flooding in wealthy nations in the global North.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the visual imagery of water in *Take Shelter* evokes the water-logged streets of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. At several moments in the film, Curtis examines the rain as it falls on his hands, scrutinising its peculiar yellow colour and greasy consistency. Its viscous texture not only suggests a connection between the unusual weather and the global oil dependency but also emphasises its materiality; its role as more than a symbol of Curtis's psychological disturbance. Read as both metaphorical and literal,

then, rain in the film links a mythical narrative of natural or divine retribution with existing conditions for those particularly vulnerable to drastic and unpredictable weather.

Even as he pursues a medio-scientific route out of his psychological difficulties, Curtis takes his dreams literally and remains compelled to prepare for the impending storm they predict. The financial and emotional implications of his actions mount as Curtis takes out a risky loan to fund the renovation of the storm shelter and is fired from his job after illegally using his company's equipment to carry out the work. Far from appearing hyperactive or emotionally unstable, however, Curtis undertakes his preparations in a logical and thought-through manner: he makes extensive calculations, carefully selects his materials for the renovation and equips the shelter with consumable and medical provisions. As a sensible individual weighing up a series of risks, Curtis presents as rational what would predominantly be seen as irrational; namely, preparing for disaster on the basis of a premonition. This subversion suggests the significance of intuitive knowledge to an understanding of the threats posed by drastic environmental change. Prioritising imagination over intellect, Curtis takes his dreams seriously as a pre-figuration of impending disaster. In doing so he, and the film's viewers, rely on knowledge that exists outside the empirically-determined frameworks of science within which public discourses of climate change tend to circulate, creating an imaginative space in which Hulme's sense of a "psychological dissonance" is potentially overcome.

Destabilising what Plumwood describes as a "cult of reason [...] that simultaneously relies on and disavows its material base" (4), and providing further evidence of their material as opposed to metaphorical role, Curtis's dreams begin to register themselves physically on his body. A dog bite that occurs in one dream causes Curtis pain well into the following day, prompting him to construct a cage for the family



dog and eventually to give him away. Later, his diluvian dreams seep into his waking life when he discovers he has urinated in his sleep. While clearly signalling Curtis's unfolding crisis of masculinity – his lack of control over his family's financial and emotional security – in crossing over from the dream-world to the diegetic reality of the film, the yellow liquid that appears on the bed sheets insists on the material significance of the dreams. Rationalist epistemologies, the film seems to suggest, are insufficient for comprehending the nature of the potential threat. The experiential and intuitive knowledge provided by the dreams destabilises normative regimes of knowledge in order to explore the ways in which climate change requires a mode of thinking able to accommodate the provisionality of human interaction with the environment. The film thus provides an opportunity for thinking through the “new esoteric centers of knowledge” (Jasanoff 237) engendered by the conceptual reconfigurations brought about by climate change.

While *Take Shelter* both encourages and resists a symbolic reading of its visual metaphors, the blurred boundary between the ostensibly irrational world of Curtis's dreams and the diegetic reality of the film is also an effect of the film's form, which strategically denies viewers the security of a firm interpretation by bridging sound and visuals across the dream-world and story-world in ways that challenge the defining lines between them. By maintaining continuity of sound across Curtis's waking and dreaming life, for example, Nichols destabilises the boundaries between fiction and reality within the film's diegesis. In the opening triptych of scenes, Curtis stands outside as a thick, yellow rain begins to fall. As the shower becomes a downpour, the sound is transposed to a domestic shower as Curtis gets ready for work. The final cut is to eggs crackling as they fry in a pan for breakfast. The sequence charts a visual trajectory from the unreadable elements of nature to the familiar domestic realm that Curtis is trying to protect. Yet the continuity of the

sound not only insists on the significance of the rain, but also places viewers in a position of epistemological uncertainty by focusing on the points at which the dividing lines between dreams, visions and reality begin to break down.

This ambiguity is amplified by Nichols's use of perspective. Tightly focused on Curtis's viewpoint throughout *Take Shelter*, viewers participate in his struggle to disentangle reality from vision or hallucination; we too scrutinise the rustling of leaves in the breeze for signs of danger and possible threat, or look up at the sky, attempting to read the gathering clouds for signs of things to come. As Bronislaw Szerszynski (2010) points out, humans have always 'read' the weather. According to Szerszynski, however, "traditional seasonal 'weather-wising' no longer works, for the simple reason that the weather is no longer sufficiently stable from one year to the next, let alone from one generation to the next." Instead, we must be "alert to its new, unstable temporality, as the coiled cycles of annual weather patterns unravel into the irreversible time of the *longue durée*, and each storm and drought becomes unseasonable, unique, historical" (24). It is this new mode of reading the weather that Nichols seems to dramatise in Curtis's extended periods of scrutiny. Repeated static shots of trees blowing in the wind, rippling grasses and cloud formations seem to both document the unremarkable landscape – making the rupture of the "unseasonable, unique, historical" storm predicted by Curtis even more shocking – and demonstrate the challenge of tuning into the climate's changing temporalities and weather. The unreadability of the landscape in these moments, its complete anonymity, undermines the techno-scientific means we have developed to 'read' the weather, suggesting that our knowledge about the material environment is both provisional and incomplete. Far from acting as a backdrop to, or obvious metaphor for, the disintegration of one man's mental health, the landscape's inscrutability becomes the occasion for the

film's meditation on our capacity to know our environment. Curtis's insight thus becomes as valuable a source of knowledge as prevalent techno-scientific explanations of the unfolding environmental crisis.

### Generic Instability

By way of a conclusion, a note on genre might help situate more securely the ways in which the tension between metaphor and materiality in *Take Shelter* makes it an innovative approach to climate change and the imaginative challenges it poses. As we have seen, Nichols presents Curtis as by turns a desperate man struggling with poor mental health and a prophet, denying viewers the satisfaction of a secure reading of his character. A key turning point in the film comes when Curtis is moved to extend his warning about the storm to his friends and neighbours in a dramatic scene that takes place at a local community centre. Having been provoked by his friend Dewart, Curtis erupts in anger and announces to a captive audience:

Listen up. There's a storm coming. Like nothing you have  
ever seen. And not one of you is prepared for it [...] Sleep  
well in your beds, 'cos if this thing comes true there aint  
gonna be any more.

In this scene, Curtis speaks with a passion and intensity rarely seen in discussions about resource depletion and ecological disaster. Yet the speech can be taken in two ways: as the ranting of a sick man or the lucid and purposeful prose of a prophet. It is clear which interpretation his audience choose. The inconvenience of Al Gore's 'Truth' is registered on the faces of the townsfolk, whose main emotional response to the outburst is embarrassment. Even when Curtis directly addresses an individual, the seated man neither

returns his gaze nor responds to his touch. Like the mythological Cassandra, Curtis's insight is outweighed by his powerlessness in the face of disbelief. The audience's discomfort resonates with Timothy Morton's analogy between the environmental crisis and the unconscious. According to Morton, people are discomforted by references to these topics not because "you are pointing to something obscene that should remain hidden" but because when it is mentioned it "becomes *conscious*" (1, original emphasis). Reminiscent of the repeated warnings from climate scientists, Curtis's outpouring heralds the surfacing of Žižek's "unknown knowns"; suppressed knowledge about the threat to the environmental.

Seeming to explode out of Curtis's unconscious and into the film's diegetic reality, a powerful storm sweeps through the town the same night. The dramatic climax of *Take Shelter* thus appears to be the realisation of Curtis's predictions: a massive storm, which the family duly wait out in the newly-built shelter. As it turns out, the storm is severe but not devastating and seems to act primarily as a metaphor for Curtis's psychic break; in realising the apocalypse has not taken place Curtis also begins to come to terms with his poor mental health. This ending places the film firmly in the realm of psychological drama: after the crisis and catharsis, the family find renewed strength in Curtis's acknowledgement of his problems. However, Nichols subverts this ending in a disturbing epilogue which signals a shift from the safety of the metaphorical to the stark reality of the literal. Having taken a seaside holiday to recuperate, Curtis and his daughter are building sandcastles on the beach when she spots a vast tornado heading in from the sea and makes the sign for 'storm'. In an exact visual echo of the opening scene, Curtis's wife looks down at her hand to find the same greasy yellow rain begin to fall. Now existing in the shared collective space of the film's diegesis, the storm assumes a materiality that disturbs the

psychological resolutions *Take Shelter* initially proffers and retrospectively destabilises the preceding narrative. As accurate premonitions of impending apocalypse, Curtis's dreams transform the film from realist psychological drama to supernatural thriller. In refusing to sit neatly within either of these generic forms, the film explores the idea of apocalyptic climate change from a metaphorical and a literal perspective simultaneously, disturbing the logocentric terms on which we currently understand the environmental crisis. Made possible by the flexibility of fictional narrative, this simultaneity makes the unthinkable thinkable by revealing to audiences their own "unknown knowns" and in doing so tackles the imaginative impasse which dominates discourses of climate change in the public sphere.

Such narrative and generic troubling is partly enabled by Nichols's status as an independent filmmaker, which positions him in the productive space between the margins and the mainstream in relation to English language film. Though *Take Shelter* at times conforms to the narrative demands of Hollywood, it sends a disturbing message about the sustainability of the reassuring family closures that are the staple of conventional Hollywood cinema and so undermines the very codes within which it is working. The film undercuts its own "escapist narrative closure and status quo conservatism" (Ivakhiv 11) by refusing to neatly tie its narrative resolutions to one man's psychological journey. The epilogue also subverts the traditional resolutions of familial stability as the film ends without the certainty of the family's safety. Like the sandcastles Curtis and his daughter are building in the final scene, the film seems to suggest that such familial and environmental foundations are by no means solid. While it may not conform to MacDonald's definition of eco-cinema, *Take Shelter* does help to reorient the way we view nature by attending to its materiality and determining power through the populist codes of conventional cinema. Though he retains

mainstream story arcs and characterisations, Nichols nonetheless creates a disturbing viewing experience which re-acclimatises audiences to the kind of uncertainty to which we may all have to become accustomed.

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay, “Knowledge, ignorance and the popular culture: climate change versus the ozone hole”, Sheldon Ungar (2000) explores why climate change fails to register cultural concern by relating it to the crisis of the hole in the ozone layer, which was able to activate the public in certain societies. For more recent explorations of the relationship between culture and climate change see, for example, a special issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* (2010) entitled “Changing Climates”; Yusoff and Gabrys (2011); and Trexler and Johns-Putra (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy’s (2004) reformulated vision of cosmopolitanism is rooted in this collective sense of the vulnerability of the planet. Invoking a “postmodern planetary consciousness”, Gilroy argues that we must re-imagine the world as “a small and fragile place, one planet among others with strictly limited resources that are allocated unequally” (83). Such a conceptual shift, he suggests, is triggered by the fact that “environmental and medical crises do not stop at national boundaries and by a feeling that the sustainability of our species is itself in question” (83).

<sup>3</sup> This is a critique that is prevalent in postcolonial criticism. In his 2009 essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, Dipesh Chakrabarty asks, “Why should one include the poor of the world – whose carbon footprint is small anyway – by use of such all-inclusive terms as *species* or *mankind* when the blame for the current crisis should be squarely laid at the door of the rich nations in the first place and of the richer classes in the poorer ones?” (216, original emphasis). See also Cilano and Deloughrey (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Nichols’s three feature films to date – *Shotgun Stories* (2007), *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Mudd* (2012) – all depict male protagonists grappling with an overweening masculinity that ultimately leads them down a path of destruction.

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<sup>5</sup> For Žižek, in framing the earth as something “Sacred” which should remain a mystery, discourses of ecology are the “ideal candidate for hegemonic ideology” and act as “the new opium of the masses” (np).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ivakhiv (2008) and O'Brien (2013).

<sup>7</sup> See also MacDonald (2001)

<sup>8</sup> The website [globalislands.net](http://globalislands.net) maintains a list of those islands that are most severely threatened by rising sea levels. A 2006 article in *The Independent* newspaper documents the disappearance of Lohachara island in the Indian Sundarbans. According to the article it is the first inhabited island to be “claimed” by global warming (Lean np).